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ON THE DOUBLE MEANING OF SYMBOLS

One is sometimes astonished that one and the same symbol can be taken in two senses which, apparently at least, are directly opposed to one another; it is not a question here, of course, of the multiplicity of meanings that, in a general way, every symbol may present according to the point of view or the level at which one envisages it, but, more specifically, of two aspects that are linked to one another by a certain relation of correlation, taking the form of an opposition, such that one of them is, so to speak, the inverse or the "negative" of the other. In order to understand this, one must start from the consideration of duality as presupposed by every manifestation and, consequently, as conditioning it in all its modes, where it must always be found again under one form or another; it is true that this duality is properly a complementarism and not an opposition; but two terms that are in reality complementary can also, from a more exterior and more contingent point of view, appear as opposed. Every opposition exists as such only at a certain level, for there cannot be any that is irreducible; at a higher level, it is resolved into a complementarism in which its two terms are already reconciled and harmonized, before finally re-entering into the unity of the common principle from which they both proceed.

One could therefore say that the point of view of complementarism is, in a certain sense, intermediate between that of opposition and that of unification; and each of these points of view has its reason for being and its proper value in the order to which it applies, although, obviously, they are not situated at the same degree of reality; what matters, therefore, is to know how to place each aspect in its hierarchical place, and not to claim to transfer it into a domain where it would no longer have any acceptable meaning.

In these conditions, one can understand that the fact of envisaging in a symbol two contrary aspects has, in itself, nothing but what is perfectly legitimate, and that moreover the consideration of one of these aspects in no way excludes that of the other, since each of them is equally true under a certain relation, and even their existence is in some way interdependent. It is therefore an error, fairly frequent besides, to think that the respective consideration of the one and of the other of these aspects must be referred to doctrines or to schools that are themselves in opposition; here, everything depends only on the predominance that may be attributed to the one in relation to the other, or sometimes also on the intention according to which the symbol may be employed, for example as an element intervening in certain rites, or again as a means of recognition; but that is a point to which we shall have to return. What clearly shows that the two aspects do not exclude one another and are capable of being envisaged simultaneously is that they may be found united in one and the same complex symbolic figuration; in this regard, it is appropriate to note, although we cannot for the moment develop this completely, that a duality, which may be opposition or complementarism according to the point of view at which one places oneself, can, as to the situation of its terms one in relation to the other, be disposed in a vertical sense or in a horizontal sense; this results immediately from the crucial schema of the quaternary, which can be decomposed into two dualities, one vertical and the other horizontal. The vertical duality may be referred to the two extremities of an axis, or to the two contrary directions according to which this axis may be traversed; the horizontal duality is that of two elements that are situated symmetrically on either side of this same axis; one may give as an example of the first case the two triangles of the seal of Solomon, and as an example of the second the two serpents of the caduceus; and one will remark that it is only in the vertical duality that the two terms are clearly distinguished the one from the other by their inverse position, whereas, in the horizontal duality, they may appear quite similar or equivalent when one envisages them separately, although nevertheless their signification is no less really contrary in this case than in the other. One may say further that, in the spatial order, the vertical duality is that of

the high and the low, and the horizontal duality that of the right and the left; this observation will perhaps seem too evident, but it is no less important for that, because, symbolically, these two couples of terms are themselves capable of multiple applications, on which there is moreover no need to insist at present, but of which it would not be very difficult to discover traces even in ordinary language, which clearly indicates that these are matters of a very general scope.

All this being posited in principle, one may without difficulty deduce from it certain consequences concerning what one might call the practical use of symbols; but, in this regard, one must first bring in a consideration of a more particular character, that of the case where the two contrary aspects are taken respectively as "beneficent" and as "maleficent." We employ these two expressions for want of better, for they have the disadvantage of being able to suggest that there is here some more or less "moral" interpretation, whereas in reality there is nothing of the kind, and that they must be understood here in a purely "technical" sense. Moreover, it must also be well understood that the "beneficent" or "maleficent" quality does not attach in an absolute manner to one of the two aspects, since it properly suits only a special application, to which it would be impossible to reduce indiscriminately every opposition whatever it may be, and in any case it necessarily disappears when one passes from the point of view of opposition to that of complementarism, to which such a consideration is totally foreign. Within these limits and taking account of these reservations, this is a point of view that normally has its place among the others; but it is also from this very point of view that there can result, in the interpretation and use of symbolism, a sort of "subversion" which often constitutes one of the characteristic "marks" of that which, consciously or not, belongs to the domain of "counter-initiation" or finds itself more or less directly subjected to its influence.

The "subversion" of which we speak may consist either in attributing to the "maleficent" aspect, while nevertheless recognizing it as such, the place that must normally return to the "beneficent" aspect, even a sort of supremacy over the latter, or in interpreting symbols in reverse of their

legitimate sense, considering as “beneficent” the aspect that is in reality “maleficent” and inversely. It must moreover be noted that, according to what we said previously, such a “subversion” may not appear visibly in the representation of symbols, since there are some for which the two opposed aspects are not marked by an exterior difference recognizable at first sight: thus, in figurations that relate to what one is accustomed to call, rather improperly besides, the “cult of the serpent,” it would often be impossible, at least if one considers only the serpent itself, to say a priori whether it is a question of the Agathodaimōn or of the Kakodaimōn; hence many mistakes, above all on the part of those who, ignorant of this double signification of the serpent, are tempted to see in it everywhere and always only a “maleficent” symbol, which is the case for the generality of modern Westerners; and what we say here of the serpent could likewise apply to many other symbolic animals, for which one has commonly taken the habit, whatever the reasons may be, of no longer envisaging more than one of the two opposed aspects that they in reality possess.

For symbols that are capable of taking two inverse positions, and especially for those that reduce to geometric forms, it may seem that the difference must appear much more clearly; and yet, in fact, it is not always so, since the two positions of the same symbol are capable of having both one and the other a legitimate signification, and moreover their relation is not necessarily that of the “beneficent” and the “maleficent,” which is, let us repeat again, only a simple particular application among all the others. What it is important to know in such cases is whether there is really a will to “reversal,” one might say, in formal contradiction with the legitimate and normal value of the symbol; this is why, as we remarked with regard to a book of which we rendered account recently, the use of the inverted triangle, for example, is far from always being a sign of “black magic,” although it is effectively so in certain cases, those in which there attaches to it an intention to take the opposite of what the triangle whose point is turned upwards represents; and, let us note incidentally, such an intentional “reversal” is also exercised upon words or formulas, as can be observed in certain practices of sorcery.

One sees therefore that the question is more complex than some imagine, and we would readily say more subtle, for what must be examined in order to know what one truly has to do with in such and such a case is less the figurations taken in their “materiality” than the interpretations that accompany them and by which is explained the intention that presided over their adoption. Still more, the most skillful and most dangerous “subversion” is certainly that which does not betray itself by singularities that are too manifest and that anyone can easily perceive, but which distorts the meaning of symbols or overturns their value without changing anything in their exterior appearances. But the most diabolical ruse of all is perhaps that which consists in having attributed to orthodox symbolism itself, as it exists in truly traditional organizations, and more particularly in initiatic organizations, which are especially targeted in such cases, the reverse interpretation that is properly the work of “counter-initiation”; and the latter, as we have recently pointed out, does not refrain from using this means in order to provoke the confusions and equivocations from which it has some profit to draw. That is, fundamentally, the whole secret of certain campaigns conducted either against esoterism in general or against this or that initiatic form in particular, with the unconscious assistance of people most of whom would be very astonished, and even terrified, if they could realize what they are being used for; it unfortunately happens sometimes that those who believe they are fighting the devil thus find themselves quite simply, without suspecting it in the least, transformed into his best servants

PSYCHIC RESIDUES

We have alluded, in connection with shamanism, to a possible use of certain forces, in cases such as that one, by the powers of "counter-initiation"; perhaps it is good to add on this point some complementary precisions, for one might be astonished that the vestiges of what was originally an authentic tradition lend themselves to a "subversion" of this kind. In truth, this case is entirely comparable to that of the psychic remains that a human being leaves behind him in passing to another state, and which, as soon as they have thus been abandoned by the "spirit," may also serve for anything; whether they are besides used consciously by a magician or a sorcerer, or unconsciously by spiritists, the more or less maleficent effects that may result from them obviously have nothing to do with the proper quality of the being to which these elements formerly belonged; it is no longer than a special category of "wandering influences," which have retained at most from this being only a purely illusory appearance.

What one must realize in order to understand such a similarity well is that spiritual influences, in order to enter into action in our world, must necessarily take appropriate "supports," first in the psychic order, then in the corporeal order itself, so that there is there something analogous to the constitution of a human being. If these spiritual influences subsequently withdraw, for whatever reason, their former corporeal "supports," places or objects, will nonetheless remain charged with psychic elements, and these will even be all the stronger and more persistent insofar as they have served as intermediaries and instruments for a more powerful action. One could logically conclude from this that the case where it is a question of important traditional and initiatic centers, extinguished for a more or less long time, is in sum the one that presents the greatest dangers in this regard, whether simple imprudences provoke violent reactions of the psychic "conglomerates" that subsist there, or above all "black magicians," to employ the expression commonly admitted, seize upon these to maneuver them at will and

obtain from them effects conformable to their designs.

Let us remark that the first of the two cases we have just indicated suffices to explain, at least in part, the noxious character presented by certain vestiges of disappeared civilizations, when they come to be exhumed by people who, ignorant of all these things, act necessarily as imprudent persons by that very fact. That is not to say that there cannot sometimes be still something else: thus, such and such an ancient civilization may, in its last period, have degenerated through an excessive development of magic, as we have already pointed out on other occasions, and its remains will then naturally keep the imprint of it, in the form of psychic influences of the lowest order. It may also be that, even outside any degeneration of this sort, places or objects were specially prepared with a view to a defensive action against those who would touch them improperly, for such precautions have in themselves nothing illegitimate, although nevertheless the fact of attaching too great an importance to them is not among the most favorable indications, since it testifies to preoccupations rather distant from pure spirituality, and even perhaps to a certain unawareness of the proper power that the latter possesses in itself and without any need to have recourse to such "adjuvants." But, all that aside, the subsisting psychic influences, deprived of the "spirit" that formerly directed them and thus reduced to a sort of "larval" state, may very well react of themselves to some provocation, however involuntary it may be, in a more or less disordered fashion and which, in any case, has no relation with the intentions of those who formerly employed them for an action of an entirely different order, any more than the incoherent manifestations of psychic "corpses" that sometimes intervene in spiritist séances have any relation with what the individualities of which they constituted the subtle form could have done or wished to do, in any circumstance whatever, and whose posthumous "identity" they still simulate as best they can, to the great amazement of naïve persons who are willing to take them for "spirits."

The influences in question may therefore, on many occasions, already be sufficiently maleficent when they are simply left to themselves; this

is a fact that results from nothing other than the very nature of these forces of the "intermediate world," and for which no one can do anything, any more than one can prevent the action of "physical" forces, by which we mean of the corporeal order, from also causing, under certain conditions, accidents for which no human will or other could be held responsible. But, moreover, these same influences are at the mercy of whoever will know how to "capture" them, just as "physical" forces are likewise; it goes without saying that both the one and the other will then be able to serve the most diverse and even the most opposed ends, according to the intentions of the one who has seized them and who will direct them as he understands; and, if it turns out that this one is a "black magician," it is quite evident that he will make of them a use entirely contrary to that which the qualified representatives of a regular tradition may have made of them originally.

Everything we have said up to here applies to the vestiges left by a tradition entirely extinguished; but, alongside this case, there is place to envisage another: that of an ancient traditional civilization that survives, so to speak, itself, in the sense that its degeneration has been pushed to such a point that the "spirit" will have ended by withdrawing from it totally; certain knowledges, which have in themselves nothing "spiritual" and belong only to the order of contingent applications, will still be able to continue to be transmitted, above all the lowest among them, but naturally they will then be susceptible of all deviations, for they too no longer represent anything but "residues" of another sort, the pure doctrine on which they ought normally to depend having disappeared. In such a case of "survival," the psychic influences formerly put to work by the representatives of the tradition may still be "captured," even without the knowledge of their apparent continuators, but henceforth illegitimate; those who will really make use of them through these will thus have the advantage of having at their disposal, as unconscious instruments of the action they wish to exercise, no longer only so-called "inanimate" objects, but also living men who likewise serve as "supports" for these influences, and whose current existence naturally confers upon these a greater "vitality." It is indeed exactly this that we had in view in considering an example such as that of

“shamanism,” with the reservation, of course, that this may not apply indiscriminately to everything one is accustomed to range under this somewhat conventional designation, and which in fact may perhaps not have reached an equal degree of decay.

A tradition that is thus deviated is truly dead as such, just as much as that for which no appearance of continuation exists any longer; moreover, if it were still living, however little it might be, such a “subversion,” which is in sum nothing other than a reversal of what subsists of it in order to make it serve in a sense anti-traditional by definition itself, could obviously not take place in any way. It is appropriate, however, to add that, even before things have come to this point and as soon as traditional organizations are sufficiently diminished and weakened to no longer be capable of a sufficient resistance, agents more or less direct of “counter-initiation” may already introduce themselves into them in order to work to hasten the moment when “subversion” will become possible; it is not certain that they succeed in all cases, for everything that still has some life can always recover itself; but if death occurs, the enemy will thus find himself in the place, one might say, quite ready to take advantage of it and to use the “corpse” immediately for his own ends. The representatives of what, in the Western world, still currently possesses an authentic traditional character, both in the exoteric domain and in the initiatic domain, would, we think, have the greatest interest in profiting from this last observation while there is still time, for, around them, the threatening signs constituted by “infiltrations” of this kind unfortunately are not lacking for whoever knows how to perceive them.

Another consideration that also has its importance is this: if “counter-initiation” has an advantage in seizing places that were the seat of ancient spiritual centers whenever it can, it is not only because of the psychic influences accumulated there and which are in some way “available”; it is also by reason of the particular situation of these places, for it goes without saying that they were not chosen arbitrarily for the role assigned to them at one time or another and in relation to this or that traditional form. “Sacred geography,” the knowledge of

which determines such a choice, is, like every other traditional science of a contingent order, susceptible of being diverted from its legitimate use and applied "in reverse": if a point is "privileged" for serving for the emission and direction of psychic influences when these are the vehicle of a spiritual action, it will be no less so when these same psychic influences are used in an entirely different manner and for ends contrary to all spirituality. This danger of diversion of certain knowledges, of which we find here a very clear example, explains moreover, let us note in passing, many reserves that are a quite natural thing in a normal civilization, but that moderns seem scarcely capable of understanding, since they commonly attribute to a will to "monopolize" these knowledges what is in reality only a measure intended to prevent their abuse as much as possible. In truth, moreover, this measure ceases to be effective only in the case where the organizations that are the depositories of the knowledges in question let penetrate into their midst unqualified individuals, even, as we have just said, agents of "counter-initiation," one of whose most immediate aims will then precisely be to discover these secrets. All this certainly has no relation with the true initiatic secret, which, as we have explained on other occasions, resides exclusively in the "ineffable" and the "incommunicable," and which, obviously, is thereby sheltered from any indiscreet search; but although only contingent matters are in question here, one must nevertheless recognize that the precautions that may be taken in this order to avoid any deviation are far from having only a negligible interest.

In any case, whether it be a question of the places themselves, of the influences that remain attached to them, or again of knowledges of the kind we have just mentioned, one may recall in this regard the ancient adage: "Corruptio optimi pessima"; and it is indeed of "corruption" that it is appropriate to speak, even in the most literal sense of this word, since the "residues" that are here in question are, as we said at the outset, comparable to the products of the decomposition of what was a living being. There is there, one might say, a sort of "necromancy" that puts into work psychic remains entirely other than those of human individualities, and it is assuredly not the least formidable, for it thereby has possibilities of action far more extended than those of vulgar

sorcery; moreover, our contemporaries must truly be very blind not to have even the slightest suspicion of it!